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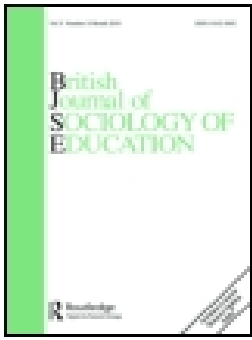
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‘Swallow your pride and fear’: the educational strategies of high-achieving non-traditional university students

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ABSTRACT

With more graduates, degree outcomes have a renewed significance for high-achieving students to stand out in a graduate crowd. In the United Kingdom, over a quarter of undergraduates now leave university with the highest grade – a ‘first-class’ degree – although students from non-traditional and underprivileged backgrounds are the least likely. This article explores the experiences of high-achieving non-traditional (HANT) university students. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 final-year students who are on course to achieve a first-class degree from working-class, minority ethnic and/or mature backgrounds, we examine their pathways to academic success through identity work and negotiations. We argue that early successes are crucial for students to re-evaluate their self-expectations as students who can achieve in higher education, while self-esteem, pride or fear can prevent students from maximising their available resources and opportunities. Implications for practice and policy are discussed, including the reflective advice from HANT students towards academic success.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, the general expansion of higher education, especially in developed countries, has enabled more people from a wider range of backgrounds to join the graduate club. In the United Kingdom, the widening participation agenda was championed by the New Labour Government (1997–2010), which aimed to increase and improve the number of university student from non-traditional backgrounds through targeted outreach initiatives and financial support (Burke 2012). Higher education policies and performance indicators have mostly focused on access figures and participation targets, with comparatively less attention given to student success, beyond retention/progression percentages and, until more recently, the ‘destinations of leavers from higher education’ (HESA 2017) or ‘graduate outcomes’ (due 2020). Few studies have explored degree outcomes, especially between students from different backgrounds (for example, Berry and Loke 2011; DfE 2017). Predominately quantitative, existing research has found that students from non-traditional and underprivileged backgrounds are less likely to achieve the highest degree outcome

(HEFCE 2014) – a ‘first-class’ honours degree – which is now achieved by over a quarter of all undergraduates (Baker 2018; ECU 2016).

In this article, we explore the experiences, decisions and pathways of high-achieving non-traditional (HANT) university students, a demographic cohort who tend to experience more struggles and challenges in higher education. Our aim is to better understand how non-traditional university students can accomplish academic success, with the focus on their educational strategies and their negotiations of personal pride and fear. With richer insights into their educational trajectories, including the problems encountered but also the solutions devised, we offer evidence-informed suggestions for practice and policy that can potentially improve the academic outcomes of non-traditional students.

Non-traditional students at university

In UK higher education discourses, non-traditional students include first-generation students, students from low-income households, students from minority ethnic/racial backgrounds, mature students (age 21 years or older on university entry) and/or students with a declared disability. Statistics show that non-traditional university students are less likely than their traditional counterparts to achieve higher degree classifications, even with the same entry grades (HEFCE 2014; Richardson 2015). Similar patterns have also been reported in Australia (Gale and Tranter 2011), Germany (Brändle and Lengfeld 2017) and the United States (Braxton 2000).

A plethora of research has investigated the struggles and challenges of non-traditional students in higher education, such as the student experience before, during and after their degrees. Researchers have explored the difficulties of widening university access and improving student success, which include discussions of student attainment, aspirations and university readiness, as well as broader identity concerns of university belongingness, including inequalities of gender, social class and ethnicity (for example, Cotton et al. 2016; Kuh et al. 2006; Richardson 2007; Thomas 2011). Many studies have also explored university students’ transition, retention and adaptability, where differences or clashes in cultures, values, identities and practices between higher education institutions and non-traditional university students have been highlighted (for example, Bathmaker et al. 2013; Holmegaard et al. 2017; Leathwood and Read 2009; Lowe and Cook 2003; Marshall et al. 2016; Reay et al. 2010; Willcoxson et al. 2011). These studies, among others, have illustrated the barriers and struggles of non-traditional students in higher education. Fewer studies, by comparison, have explored their academic success at university (for example, Devlin 2013; Garrett and Rubie-Davies 2014).

Studies on high-achieving university students have focused on individual factors and aptitude. These research studies, overwhelmingly quantitative and inspired by educational psychology, have explored various predictors of academic success, such as self-belief, motivation, preparation, cognition, learning styles as well as personality traits and self-regulated learning (for example, Komarraju et al. 2011; Lee and Lee 2012; Richardson et al. 2012; Robbins et al. 2004), which can also vary by context, especially across institutions and countries/cultures (Lee et al., 2017). US studies on the experiences of first-generation university students noted the importance of personal motivation, grit, parental and peer support for high attainment (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco, 2005). In New Zealand, Millward et al. (2016) found in their qualitative study of 22 high-achievers from non-traditional

backgrounds that academic success was driven by resilience, work ethic and self-efficacy. UK research on high achievers is still largely situated within compulsory education, with little attention at university level (beyond headline statistics of degree classification percentages), especially for non-traditional students. Our study contributes to this gap in the literature.

Academic success and student identity

The success and failure of students in higher education are commonly viewed as the outcome of the relationship between the student and their educational institution. In Tinto's (1993) model of student success, students enter university with their own experiences and resources, which underpins their ability and aspirations to integrate and complete their degree education. Tinto's work has been popularly applied for understanding retention, as students who struggled with academic and social integration are more likely to disengage or withdraw. Academic success is therefore premised on student identity and the ability to immerse themselves to 'fit in' with university ethos and expectations, akin to a 'fish in water'.

This analogy is popular in Bourdieu (1977) theory of social reproduction, which considers structural and social inequalities, especially through the education system. Like Tinto, Bourdieu posits that academic success reflects the 'matching' between students and universities, albeit this process/outcome is socially patterned. In short, affluent students are typically socialised with dispositions (i.e. habitus) and resources (i.e. capital) that are valued and rewarded in higher education. Whereas students from poorer backgrounds, including non-traditional students, tend to have little or no prior knowledge or available resources to support their higher education, which often results in a range of struggles as mentioned earlier (and therefore akin to a 'fish out of water', as universities constitute a foreign or even hostile environment for 'people like them').

Yet there are exceptions to this pattern of social inequality as life experiences and trajectories, even when confined to higher education, are complex and situated within multiple identity formations and negotiations (Christie et al. 2008). Some individuals will deviate from broader social patterns and inequalities that are typical for 'people like them', despite the challenges of non-traditional students to self-identify as a university student (Leathwood 2006). According to Gee (2000), our identity is essentially boiled down to the certain 'kind of person' that one wants to be and be recognised as, which constitutes a continuous and fluid process as identities change over space and time.

With our focus on HANT university students, we believe an exploration of these students' ongoing (re)construction and negotiation of identity will offer a useful lens in understanding their pathways to academic success. Specifically, identity work focuses on how individuals construct, or author, their own identity within specific contexts, such as established/institutional norms and cultures of practices (Gee 2000; King 2011; Reay et al. 2010). According to Calabrese-Barton et al., identity work constitutes:

the actions that individuals take and the relationships they form (and the resources they leverage to do so) at any given moment and as constrained by the historically, culturally, and socially legitimized norms, rules, and expectations that operate within the spaces in which such work takes place. Individuals author possible identities through identity work over time both with and against the norms of the worlds they inhabit. (2013, 38)

Within the spectrum of structure and agency, we view identity work as the ways in which individuals choose to present and perform themselves, with a recognition that these individual decisions and performances are also shaped, influenced and even patterned by wider social factors (see Wong and Chiu, 2019). Our focus on identity work is interested in the 'meso' level of interactions as students negotiate, with their dispositions, the actions and practices that they consider to be plausible and intelligible.

Non-traditional students typically begin their higher education with identities and ideologies that are less consistent with their university, due to unfamiliarity. Most will adapt and survive, whilst some may struggle and leave. But few will thrive. To achieve academic success, HANT students may need to author or renegotiate their student identities in ways that are still feasible and intelligible for 'people like them'. We are thus interested in the identity work, performances and negotiations of HANT students that can shed light on their educational strategies, decisions and successes.

The study

This article draws on an in-depth narrative case-study of 30 HANT students, who are final-year students from the social sciences in two post-1992 universities in London. While our aim is not to generalise, a range of students were recruited across age (18 were mature, 12 were 'young' – aged 20 years or younger upon university entry) and ethnicity (11 White British, 19 minority ethnic/other students, including British Asian, Black British, White European and 'Other' – which includes Arab, Middle Eastern, mixed heritage and Far Eastern), albeit with a heavier balance of women ($n=23$) than men ($n=7$). These proportions are generally consistent with the student cohorts of their respective social science departments. To strengthen anonymity, the degree subject and university of each student remain undisclosed, alongside any details that could risk exposing their identities. As an indication, our students studied subjects including criminology, education, international relations, policies and sociology.

Our students were all 'on course' to achieve a first-class degree, indicated by their attainments in the previous year and ongoing grades. According to Woodfield (2014), the social sciences have a lower rate of 'good' degree graduates than other disciplines, including first-class students. The post-1992 London universities in our study, codenamed Harper and Segway, have a diverse student population in terms of age, social class, ethnicity and entry routes into higher education. Typical of many post-1992 UK universities, Harper and Segway have a high proportion of non-traditional students and are historically teaching oriented, with a developed teaching and learning system that seems to provide a suite of support for their students, such as study advisors, online materials and an emphasis on inclusive curriculums. As non-traditional students reportedly develop a stronger sense of belonging in post-1992, as compared to pre-1992, universities (Reay et al. 2010), the context of our study offers a qualitative insight into the nuances of identity developments for non-traditional students in university environments that are supposedly 'friendlier' (at least by student population diversity).

Our participants were evenly recruited from both universities, who were purposefully invited to participate based on their likelihood to get a first-class degree, although we acknowledge that their degree classification was still to be determined by their final-year (or semester, to be precise) performance. Social science tutors were asked to recommend suitable students, with the brief that students would ideally be 'first generation' and 'high

achieving' or 'has potential to get a first-class degree'. Students were then invited to take part by email, using the same brief, and the majority agreed to participate from the initial invitation. It is noted that our HANT students, especially mature students, were not academic high-fliers in compulsory schooling. Many reported average school grades and some did poorly, with occasional fails, because some said that, back then, education was not considered a priority. It is not uncommon for non-traditional students to experience schooling as unpleasant, worthless and not for 'people like us'. Yet one key driver behind the determination of our HANT students to study at university was a desire to prove to themselves or to others their abilities.

Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average, with the longest over 150 minutes, and were conducted in a quiet room at each respective university, audio recorded and later transcribed with sensitive data anonymised. A range of issues was probed including family background and support, secondary school experience, detailed accounts of each academic year at university, preparation and support for assessment, and general reflections of their university experiences and aspirations. This article focuses on their pathways to academic success, especially educational strategies. We encouraged students to reflect and discuss why certain decisions were taken (or not), which also sheds light on their identity work and processes. For clarification, the key points of each interview were revisited at the end as students were asked to summarise and reflect on their pathways to academic success. Data were collected between 2015 and 2017, with three cohorts of final-year students, all of whom were graduates of the higher fees regime since 2012. Most students, after their participation, graduated with a first-class degree, although seven students ended up with upper-second-class degrees.

Data analysis was informed by a social constructionist perspective which understands social phenomena and identities as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr 2003; Gee 2000). Interview data were organised using NVivo and initially coded by emerging concepts as we moved 'back and forth' between the data and analyses in an iterative process through which the dimensions of concepts and themes are refined and/or expanded through the comparison of data (Corbin and Strauss 2014). A provisional coding framework was established after each author independently coded the same interview data by relevant themes, which was then discussed and compared, with any differences in the application of codes debated until a consensus was reached. These codes produced clusters of ideas for further coding and the emergent of key themes, in a process comparable to a funnel as key concepts became more abstract (Corbin and Strauss 2014). With the focus on the educational strategies of HANT students, the key themes for this article included strategies of learning, network of available support, maximise opportunities and identity construction, change or conflict. These themes, especially the latter, were also analysed through the lens of identity work, with the focus on how students discuss and reflect on changes in their academic practices or strategies to strengthen education outcomes. Here, we looked for examples of identity work and the different ways in which students appear to author or negotiate their learning approaches and performances (Calabrese Barton et al. 2013; Gee 2000). As discussed in the following, we found two interdependent themes which seem to underpin our students' negotiations of self-identities, namely those of pride and fear. We follow the Oxford Dictionaries' (2010; emphasis added) definition of pride as the 'consciousness of one's own dignity', and the meaning of fear as 'an unpleasant emotion caused by the [*real or perceived*] threat of danger, pain, or harm'.

Becoming a high achiever

Our HANT students agreed that being ‘on course’ to achieve a first-class university degree was never an expected or predicted pathway. Instead, many recounted their struggles as a school pupil and so their eventual entry into higher education was already considered a personal and academic accomplishment. Once at university, our students – consistent with existing literature – noted a steep learning curve to familiarise themselves with the higher education culture and environment, such as teaching styles and perceived expectations of university students, especially as autonomous learners. In this section, we explore the educational strategies of HANT students through the lens of identity work, which appears to revolve around the negotiation and conquering of individual pride and fear.

In the first year of university, especially the first term, some students recalled their fears and concerns about ‘fitting in’, as well as being self-conscious of their ability to complete and pass assignments. For example, Tariq (‘Other’ young male) questioned ‘will I be able to cope?’ and ended up ‘buying lots of books before the start’ for self-reassurance. These anxieties, fortunately, were soon eased as most HANT students seem to have experienced their transition into university as smoother than anticipated (see Tinto 1993). Credit is probably due for the increased efforts of universities and staff (especially at post-1992 universities such as Harper and Segway) to support student integration into higher education, which has been a key priority for English universities since the rise in tuition fees (BIS 2011). Tariq admitted that by the end of first year he ‘felt a bit too comfortable’ because he ‘enjoyed the modules, feeling relaxed ... [and] know everyone’s names’ and achieved a range of grades which averaged a 2:1.

That said, the importance of getting good first-year grades appears critical for our HANT students, especially for their identity development, even though first-year grades do not contribute to their overall degree classifications, which only considers second and final-year marks. Whilst some students were indeed disappointed that their first-year results effectively count for nothing, our data suggest that first-year grades provided many HANT students with a renewed motivation for and belief in their academic abilities and potentials. As Leo (White British mature male) reflected:

Good grades [in first year] were a major change in my life. It really put me on track towards becoming a good student. When I arrived here I didn’t think I would do well. I thought I’d be happy with a 2:2, if I was lucky. And after my first-year I realised that I could do very well in this subject.

Many HANT students shared this view, where good grades have mitigated initial doubts of their own abilities and prompted fresh aspirations for higher achievement and a positive student identity. According to Bianca (White European mature female):

When I got my first results, I was like, is that me? Really? I was overwhelmed by the feedback and grades ... I got 70s and 80s, I was speechless. I’ve never been a high-achiever.

The early surprise of high grades appears to have prompted some HANT students to re-evaluate their self-expectations as students who can achieve and succeed in higher education. Similarly, Dennis (White British mature male) said he was flabbergasted when he ‘got a really good mark [90%] in my first essay’. Encouraged by this initial success, he said his confidence and determination increased dramatically as he wanted to see ‘if I can repeat

the grades because I did not want it to drop'. With an overall grade of a first in the first year, Dennis said he 'force[s] [him]self to ask questions [in seminars]' as he 'tried to understand everything ... checking [him]self all the time and [he] was very determined to continue' this promising start as he strived to be 'an ideal student or something' (see Wong and Chiu, 2018). For students such as Dennis, the role of a vocal or knowledgeable student is constructed and sustained as a new form of student identity and a continued conscious attempt to master an unfamiliar approach to education.

Likewise, Ruby (Other young female) recalled that 'I used to be quiet in class ... because I don't want to say something that makes me look stupid'. She would avoid open conversations in fear of negative reactions from staff or fellow students. Ruby said in school she often lacked confidence and doubted the validity of her viewpoints, questions or answers. At university, however, in one of her first-year modules she said she was 'effectively forced ... to talk more' due to persistent low student attendance. Ruby admitted that in seminars 'I had nowhere to hide', which has also prompted her to do extra preparation and reading to avoid 'looking stupid' when probed to talk. That module ended up as her highest grade in the first year. This learning context has somewhat forced Ruby to react and in turn provided her with an opportunity to develop a student identity often desired in higher education.

For students such as Ruby (and Dennis), the strategy of forcing oneself to be an active participant, which can lead to high attainment, demonstrates the availability of a high-achiever identity for non-traditional university students. Specifically, it is through 'the discursive, representational, and semiotic processes through which identities are created, sustained, and contested' (Gee 2000, 114). Here, our HANT students felt able (rather than unable) to work towards their identities as high achievers – an identity that few, if any, have prior experiences or expectations of. In the following, we unpick the challenges of forcing oneself to accept and develop these new identities, which is often easier said than done due to internal conflicts of self-identities and practices. To become a high achiever, our students experience the challenge and dilemma between knowing and doing the pathways to academic success. The latter is complicated not only by individual aptitude but also by self-identity and the presentation of the self, especially individual pride and fear. The fear of 'looking stupid' and thus the protection of self-pride may inspire some students (e.g. Ruby) to excel academically, but such fear or pride can also be a double-edge sword that prevents other students from capitalising on their available resources.

The conflicts between fear, pride and attainment

Our HANT students suggested that their can-do approach is critical in their academic success, which were undoubtedly encouraged by their positive first-year grades. As Janice (Black British mature female) said, 'even when you are screaming with fear inside but if you have that can-do attitude, you'll be amazed to see what you'll do'. Central in this approach is for students to be proactive and receptive learners, especially when in need of advice or help. Yet we found that the process of seeking support appeared difficult or even uncomfortable for some students due to fear but also pride. When asked to reflect on their educational strategies, our students reiterated the importance of maximising their available support, especially from teaching and professional support staff. Crystal ('Other' mature female) reflected that:

I asked for help in first-year because I wasn't sure how to deal with all the readings that we were given. Then second-year, I also asked for help. We were talking about taking notes for my readings and I felt like I needed to do a little more. They helped me, telling me how to take notes.

Most students recognise the availability of these support, even if they themselves 'rarely meet with staff' (Leo, White British mature male). Perhaps more concerning, some students confessed their fear of asking for help, whilst a few others avoided support to demonstrate their 'independent' student identity. For example, Rya (British Asian mature women) admitted that 'I've never really approached a teacher, I don't know why really, I think it's the fear, the unknown'. Similar to Ruby (see earlier), Rya elaborated that she is never certain or confident of what tutors might say in response to her questions or assignment drafts. Her fears were not helped by unfavourable peer feedback, who told her that the allocated professional support staff for her degree 'can be harsh, soul crushing', which made her 'scared to go'. To avoid her fears, Rya said she intentionally missed individual tutorials with tutors, particularly in the first year, where she achieved mediocre grades. In retrospect, Rya believed her fears have severed her from seeking advice from professional support staff as well as tutors. Rya enjoyed a more successful second year due to the format of her modules which made greater use of group and class tutorials, where she felt less intimidated as fellow students were 'all in the same boat' in terms of understanding (or lack thereof). However, Rya did eventually end up with a 2:1 degree. Given that her final-year grades included an individual dissertation, which is worth more credits than other modules, we speculate that her fears of the unknown may have limited her engagement with her dissertation supervisor, where support is often based on individual tutorials and communications. The self-identity of Rya, especially her fears of one-to-one academic discussion with staff, may have compromised her chances to achieve a first-class degree.

Relatedly, coursework feedback – either in draft form or as graded work – can also strike fear in some students. Vinnie (British Asian mature female) recalled an unfortunate instance with the student support service who commented on her draft essay with '90% wrong ... with cross marks all over the work'. Despite feeling depleted, Vinnie continued her engagement because 'I know I can get some help here', even if some comments 'are really hard to take'. For others, a more selective approach was adopted to safeguard some positivity and self-pride. Bibi (Other young female) explained that 'I look at the grades and sometimes I come back later to look at positive feedback and see what I have done well and I try to do that again'. However, she said she 'avoids the negative feedback [because] I get upset', even though she admitted that 'sometimes I look, but sometimes I don't [as] the feedback can obstruct me' when she is unsure how the comments can be applied to her next assignment. Asked whether she had met her tutors to discuss feedback, she said 'I wanted to do that in year one but I didn't, because I just, I don't know, I was really upset' with the grade. From students such as Vinnie and Bibi, we witnessed the dynamics and tensions of identity constructions and negotiations between how one feels and what one should do to accomplish academic success (i.e., knowing versus doing). Hence, pride and fear can refrain students from being the kind of person, or student, who seeks support.

From a more conscientious viewpoint, Annie (White British young female) said she limited her contact with tutors because 'I think a lot of tutors get pissed off if people keep emailing' them for additional support or feedback. Annie explained that when she achieves a good grade (i.e. a 2:1 or 1st), she tends to avoid further engagement with her tutors even

if she has questions about the feedback or module because ‘I don’t want to look big-headed ... I don’t want to waste their time and I’m sure there are other people ... those who failed ... who probably want to talk to them more’. While Annie’s concerns of being seen by others as overconfident (‘big-headed’) may be an overthink, we believe that such self-awareness (of not seeking support) could be a risky practice that curtails the utilisation of available support, due to concerns of students about frustrating staff as well as the perceived unreasonableness of asking for advice after receiving a good grade. Such self-consciousness and mentality may be more prominent among (especially non-traditional) students with a limited understanding of the rules of the higher education game.

Furthermore, the reluctance of students to seek support can also be driven by their more enduring self-identity and sense of pride. For instance, Foreman (Black British young male) attributed his childhood and upbringing for his perspectives in life where ‘I don’t really ask anything from anyone in life’. Asking for help, therefore, makes Foreman ‘feel uncomfortable’. As he strived for the identity of an autonomous student – and that was the kind of student he had always presented – he avoided one-to-one tutorials with lecturers and the student support service. Although Foreman did well in the first year, his grades since were mixed, which concerned him. It was not until the middle of the final year that he summed up enough courage to seek support, following the advice of a tutor who said that his essay ‘had strong arguments ... but was left down by academic writing’. Foreman reflected that ‘I was very good in class and I make lots of good points’ but he said that he did not realise there was sometimes a mismatch between his confidence to articulate verbally and his ability to convert the quality of those arguments into written work. Foreman believed that comment from his tutor was his moment of epiphany – in that he needs to make use of all available support in his quest for a first-class degree. In his final semester (at the time of the interview), Foreman said that:

I realised the value of showing your lecturers your draft, I’ve learnt to let other people look at my work ... I also send her [student support service] all my essays, I see the benefit now and she really helped with my English and grammar.

He lamented that if he sought support earlier, he would have got much better grades in his other assignments, ‘cruising with a 1st’. When asked for his advice to new undergraduates, Foreman said:

I’ll tell them to swallow their pride, you’re gonna need help, even if you have a system in place, it can be improved on. Don’t get too stuck in your own way. Take your shield down, just open yourself up ... Go to the student support service if you have issues with your writing. Go and bother your lecturers and ask them to see drafts, go to every tutorial and make sure you are there for every session because you will learn something.

Foreman offered an experiential reflection which underpins the importance of seeking support, even if it challenged his pride. He was able to renegotiate and reconstruct his understanding of being a university student and reworked his identities to accept and practice the educational dispositions of seeking support. Similar experiences were also narrated by other HANT students, especially an acceptance that asking for help is a common or even expected practice, including competent and independent students. Hence, the ‘can-do’ attitude shared by our HANT students ought to also include the simple but effective phrase (and practice): ‘just ask’.

Mastering the higher education system: lessons from HANT students

Our data suggest that the educational strategies of HANT students are typically developed through trial and error, in a recurrent and reflective process where students gradually learn and practice the explicit and implicit rules of their own higher education. We found the importance of early academic success in the feasibility and development of a high-achiever identity – a new identity for many non-traditional students. We also explored the multi-faceted identity work and negotiations of students to seek or accept support due to their fear and pride. In this section, we draw on the reflections and advice of our HANT students towards academic success as we discuss the potential implications of our finding for policy and practice.

Previous literature has found that the struggles of non-traditional university students include the lack of familiarity, knowledge and resources in the higher education system (for example, Cotton et al. 2016), as well as identity and value conflicts (for example, Reay et al. 2010). While our HANT students also experienced some of these barriers, we highlight the importance of self-identity and the dilemmas of students on whether or not to play the higher education game. Our identity lens reminds us that individual actions and performances reflect the ‘kind of person’ that one wishes to become, for self and for others (Gee 2000). The struggles of some HANT students to seek or accept help from staff due to pride is an illustrative example of the how perceptions of self, especially by others (e.g. staff and peers), such as requesting or requiring support, might be inconsistent with their identity work to be an independent learner. According to Leathwood (2006), university students tend to both expect and want to be independent learners, as this is generally considered essential in personal growth, maturity and employment preparation. However, for some HANT students, aspirations for independence were interpreted to mean the avoidance of staff support, which can harm their pathways to educational success. Bourdieu (1977) might interpret this difference between knowing (what to do) and (actually) doing as a mismatch of dispositions between the middle-class establishment (e.g. universities) and the values (and habitus) of non-traditional working-class students, which, in this case, appears to be the misguided belief that an independent student identity ought to resist support from others, including staff. We believe that the unease of HANT students to seek support as part of their journey to be high achievers is a barrier that can potentially be addressed from the outset. As Alexis (White British mature female), Maggie (White British mature female) and Leo (White British mature male) reflected in their advice for new students:

They’re lecturers, not mind readers ... talk to the staff in your modules, really speak up and because communication is the number one skill you need in this course. It’s like the old saying, ‘you don’t ask, you don’t get’. (Alexis)

Don’t be afraid to talk to your lecturers. You know, always communicate with your lecturers, tell them if you don’t understand something. (Maggie)

Take advantage of your tutors and make use of the academic staff and support staff that are available. (Leo)

Our HANT students reiterated the importance of embracing, utilising and maximising the available support. For universities, the provision of student support services is important, as is the support provided by tutors. Yet these support and advice are only useful when actively used and effectively decoded by students. With considerations of student identity,

especially fear and pride, we argue that universities and staff will need to take a more proactive and conscious approach to mitigate some of these student concerns, which seems to be particularly prominent for non-traditional students as seen through the lens of identity work. Hence, to break down the apparent stigma of seeking support (especially among non-traditional students, see Thunborg et al. 2012), the practice of seeking support must be normalised as part of the teaching and learning process. We need to dispel the perception that seeking support is reserved for those who are desperate or dependent and promote the importance of utilising their available support as a key attribute of an independent student. As Selina (British Asian young female) said to future students:

You decided to come here, you must work for it. No one's going to be spoon feeding you. If you need help, you need to go to the lecturer. They're not going to come find you if something is wrong with your essay or if you're not in class. It's just that you have to up your game now.

Beyond the explicit communication of the support available to students, we could potentially incorporate the use of this support (e.g. student support service or individual tutorial with tutor) to be a central element of the degree course, in a similar way to the embedment of academic study skills into the subject curriculum (Wingate 2006). For example, as suggested by a few of our participants, it could be made compulsory for students to seek and attend an individual tutorial with their tutor, such as to agree/confirm an assignment as part of the one-to-one support. This way, the pride or fear associated with seeking support could be alleviated and masked since individual conversations with staff would constitute a normal and expected part of the degree, like attendance at lectures or seminars. Indeed, Alexis (White British mature female) said students should always capitalise on the support offered by lecturers, especially feedback. She claimed that 'if the lecturer reads draft, then always use that opportunity to get some feedback, silly not to, even if it's just [for a few] paragraphs'. With renewed confidence driven by her first-year success, Alexis said she is 'always asking questions' to ensure that she fully understands what is expected of her next assignment as well as how she could improve based on comments from her last submission.

We highlighted the importance of the first year. Not only does it offer students a 'low-risk' taste of degree expectations, given that the grades achieved do not often contribute to final degree classifications, but it allows students to gain first-hand experiences as well as a fresh or renewed aspiration to be academically successful (see Ruby earlier). Given the trial nature of the first year, we believe an investment in formative assessments (i.e. assessment for learning, as opposed to assessment of learning) will encourage students to actively engage in their learning process and empower them to develop self-regulated learning as part of their student identity. This is especially crucial for non-traditional students who tend to perceive academic cultures as foreign and who also self-doubt their academic capability and performance. A safer and more inclusive learning environment where students can explore their academic strengths and weaknesses, and acculturate in their situated academic practice and conventions, will foster the development of self-confidence and aspiration towards a high-achieving student identity (Crosling et al. 2008).

For her final-year research dissertation, Alexis admitted that she 'spoke to three other tutors' as well as her supervisor as she maximised the support her tutors in the department could provide. Whilst her proactiveness is highly commended, her actions were by no means second nature, especially for non-traditional students (Collier and Morgan 2008). To overcome their fear in seeking support or pride in accepting feedback, students such as Alexis

(and Annie, see earlier) have made conscious attempts to rework their student identity as active seekers and recipients of advice, particularly the decoding of feedback on previous assignments (Orsmond and Merry 2013). Our data echo existing studies on the importance of feedback and we believe that, given the effort invested by HANT students to fully utilise this resource, students will probably benefit from dedicated sessions with staff which aim to unpack assessment feedback with students (Price et al. 2010). As per our suggestion with individual tutorials earlier, this form of support could also be made compulsory or is built-in as part of an existing programme in order to benefit all students rather than the selective few with the confidence to seek help.

Furthermore, Becky (White British mature female) reminded prospective students to consider family and friends as key supporters in their higher education (see Wong 2018) for further discussions). Becky said her experiences at university, including module content and assignment, were often 'dinner conversations' at home, which have helped her own consolidation of knowledge and understanding. Becky also had a study buddy who 'read each other's draft ... [and] bounce ideas off each other'. The importance of social capital is well documented, especially for mature students at university (O'Shea 2015), as a strategy to pool together available resources to generate educational capital and dispositions. As such, students should be regularly reminded of the value of their social network in their degree education, even though peers may, as experienced by Rya (see earlier), have different or negative viewpoints about the value of this available support.

The underlying message from our HANT students on their strategies for academic success is highlighted by Foreman's (Black British young male) assertion that 'students should not be afraid to ask'. His own journey from feeling 'too proud' to seek support to be an active seeker of academic advice is illustrative of the identity work and changing practices of being a student, which can be fluid and amenable. Influenced by staff and the higher education environment, his educational dispositions have shifted from avoidance of support to acceptance of advice and it was a conscious decision to step out of his comfort zone to redevelop his student identity. These seemingly simple acts of asking, such as for permission to record a lecture, have helped students such as Whitney (Black British mature female) to better retain information. For Alison (British Asian young female), her asking of example assignment submissions has enabled her to appreciate the quality of work expected for a final-year essay. To minimise and reduce students' fear or pride in asking, or information seeking more generally, staff could reflect and draw on their experiences and pre-empt some of these potential queries through the provision of these resources from the outset, such as a 'frequently asked questions' leaflet, or the frequent use of anonymous questions from students at the end of a session (e.g. use of smartphones and educational learning apps, or traditional 'post-it' notes). These strategies would promote a positive and inclusive learning environment for critical thinking and questioning.

In this article, we have argued that the overarching strategy for the academic success of HANT students can be boiled down to their willingness to ask for support or help, be it from staff, peers or family. Here, we mark the difference between knowing what to do and actually doing it, with the latter complicated by identity conflicts – namely that of fear and pride. So where do we go from here? Staff and universities may already be doing more than ever to support students, such as in the provision of student support and services. However, we ought to consider the struggles experienced by some students in the application of knowledge into practice. The support provided must therefore align to the support that

students actively seek to use. Our focus on identity work has offered us important insights into the subtle but significant influences of fear and pride on student practice and action, which may disproportionally affect non-traditional students who often lack the dispositions and capital needed to excel in higher education. The academic success of our HANT students certainly bucks the trend as we discussed our implications for policy and practice, especially their atypical and extensive use of their available support. This article unveils the power of ‘just ask’, and if we can play a part in their educational journey, we ought to accustom ourselves to proactive practices whenever appropriate, possible and feasible.

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